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Once Upon a Time... Vestiges of Images

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RÉFÉRENCE

Tacita Dean, Paris : Paris-Musées, 2003

Rodney Graham, Marseille : MAC ; Paris : Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2003

Steve McQueen : Speaking in Tongues, Paris : Paris-Musées, 2003

- 1 Three major exhibitions this year offer an opportunity to once again register the importance of the challenge of film-and video in the broadest sense-for many contemporary artists. Moving images and the periods of time they create are still opening up areas of investigation in the field of performances, whether they have to do with an immediate reality or involve memory in all its forms, personal, collective, historical, mythological and artistic. The main activity of the three artists concerned here is not exclusive, but involves installing images projected in exhibition venues. Although they are quite individual in their expression, and belong neither to the same generation nor to the same geographical area, Rodney Graham, Steve McQueen and Tacita Dean produce an art which is not without shared points and concerns. These three travellers, with their fondness for human adventure narratives, and in love with language, have turned the obsolescence of the film medium into the actual condition of a current exploration of ways of looking at things and visual attentiveness, at a time when, in the use often made of them, very sophisticated digital technologies are tending to sidestep the archaism governing visual sensations and the mental images which these produce, by including them in a time-frame and thus in a history.
- 2 If the loop device, based on the film principle, is Rodney Graham's preferred conceptual and aesthetic form-which he combines with mirror and inlay effects in both literary narratives and image sequences-, for Tacita Dean it is likewise a way of exhausting the motif and freeing it from its exceptional temporal contingencies (the chance recording of

the Green Ray on film loses its rarity when it is played over and over again). In another way, the loop projection of Steve McQueen's films like *Illuminating* and *Once Upon a Time*, means that viewers work their way into some kind of cut within the narrative, free to be present in a part of the narrative, valid for the whole, or locate the join of the loop and thus construct a beginning and an end, and reorganize time in a possible narrative chronology. When Rodney Graham "reinstates" a mobile *camera obscura* in the form of a 19th century American mail-coach, it is indeed to a spectacle of indeterminate length that he invites the traveller-observer, if not the one that this latter wants to grant him. The artist thus offers an actual experience of duration to viewers, who are not exclusively conditioned by the objective length of a constructed narrative. The extreme attention which these three artists pay to the presentation of their images—distance to the onlooker, quality of darkness and lighting, presence of projectors in the exhibition room, as well as the sounds they make—clearly indicates the degree to which reception is a fundamental challenge for the perception of their work; this attention is less frequent when the showing of films is involved, but it merits emphasis as long as it conditions the observer's access to this type of work.

- 3 The three catalogues accompanying these exhibitions contain a raft of reflections helping to broach these issues; and precisely by veering away from the artists, they lead to more general considerations. Charles-Arthur Boyer sees in the "breathing" and "pulsing" of Steve McQueen's images the mark of life's murmur, and their capacity to provide sensation as much as meaning, and touch the onlooker as if it were necessary "to try and show certain ways of constructing reality, which make it that much easier to live", he says, quoting Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Reloading human relations, image as undertaking and object of rescue, these are ideas which Michael Newman develops from documents saved by Tacita Dean: the desynchronization between the time of the event (a shipwreck, a disappearance) and the time in which the artist "salvages" the traces of this event can be compared with the desynchronization separating the appearance of a technique and the time of its obsolescence brought on by the logic of "progress". This asynchrony (the duty and necessity of art?) which consists, for example, in using the film medium in the age of the digital, shows the finiteness of media, and the historicity of events, but also challenges the idea of a progress associated with these techniques. Necessity of suspense, delay, silence; in his text "L'Eternel retour taciturne", Jean-Luc Nancy takes the thread from the name of Tacita Dean to find echoes of mythology in the artist's silent work. The art of the eternal return—which dictates silence "precisely where the alternate or simultaneous voices of science, religion, politics and philosophy strive to speak"—asserts that "the most ancient past always comes back, not as a new present, but as the past it still is, and that it even aggravates things by coming back in order the better to disappear". And Tacita Dean does indeed focus on a work of anamnesis with film which, better than any other medium, endlessly updates the disappearance.
- 4 Anthony Spira, curator of the Rodney Graham show, sees in the artist's "cyclo-logical journey" and his use of cultural stereotypes by way of repetition, "an on-going renewal of the present and a temporary erasure of failure." If the only real paradise is the one that has just been lost, as Beckett put it, then Steve McQueen, Tacita Dean and Rodney Graham all draw near this thoroughly human, thoroughly subjective truth, forever being re-enacted and re-lost, of the desire for a paradise here and now. The insistence on the presentness of the projection tends towards the experience of this desire.